

Putting Brandom on His Feet: A Realist Interpretation of Inferentialism

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In Brandom's pragmatic semantics (also known as inferentialism) linguistic meaning is assumed to be created by social practices of giving and asking for reasons. This goes along with the rejection of extralinguistic referential relations. The aim of this paper is to get semantic realism back on board by identifying some elements of inferentialism that lend themselves to a realist interpretation. This interpretation is supported by a comparison with causal theories of reference and by appealing to the notion of social triangulation. The resulting semantics combines realism about reference (and truth) with the non-reductive account of normativity that is so characteristic of Brandom.

1. Inference and Representation

The view that the meaning of a word or sentence is identical to its *use* in language, and that language is primarily a social practice, is mainly associated with the name of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958, §§ 30 and 43). It is opposed to semantic theories that construe meanings as abstract entities (for example, propositions) or as somehow determined by mental entities (for example, intentions). As is well known, however, Wittgenstein left it to others to develop a systematic "use theory" of meaning. One of these "others" is Robert Brandom, whose thoughts about meaning, language, and social practices in general, have attracted much attention in the past two decades, more precisely, since the publication of his book *Making It Explicit* in 1994.

Brandom's use theory, which he also calls "semantic pragmatism" and "pragmatic semantics," sticks out among other approaches of this sort because of its sheer size and richness of details. It is part of a comprehensive system that also deals with normativity, truth, and intentionality, to mention just three important themes.¹ The core of Brandom's semantics is the assumption that the meaning (or propositional content) of an assertion depends on its inferential role, that is, on its function as a premise or conclusion in inferences.² One understands an assertion if one is able to draw the relevant inferences. Brandom

emphasizes that drawing inferences is a kind of knowing-how, a practical activity or capacity, rather than some kind of theoretical knowledge.

Furthermore, Brandom also leaves no doubt that the main opponent of inferentialism is “representationalism,” which is his term for approaches that start with the concept of representation and use this for defining the concept of inference. A representationalist theory would typically describe how words and sentences refer to things and facts in the world, how the truth value of a sentence depends on the reference of the words appearing in the sentence, and finally, how true conclusions can be inferred from true premises.

Brandom turns this explanatory strategy upside down. For him, the basic notion is that of inference.³ Inferences between sentences determine the meanings of these sentences and of the words contained in them. There are “good” inferences and “bad” ones. Roughly speaking, neglecting a lot of details, we may say that the good inferences are those which are endorsed by the community. “Truth” is introduced into the theory only at a later stage, being defined as that which is preserved in the transition from premises to conclusions in good inferences.

As to semantic *reference*, this is not a relation between language and the world, such as between the word “dog” and a class of hairy animals. It is rather a relation between the word and another part of discourse. Imagine, for example, a dialogue about someone’s *pet*. At some point in this dialogue, the pet would perhaps be specified as a “dog,” which would establish a semantic relation between the word “dog” and previous occurrences of the word “pet” in the same dialogue. Brandom calls this an *anaphoric* account of “refers.” Anaphoric reference is intralinguistic reference and is not to be confused with extralinguistic reference, which does not exist in Brandom’s system. The purpose is “to show how an analysis in terms of anaphoric mechanisms can provide the resources for a purely intralinguistic account of the use of the English sentences by means of which philosophers make assertions about extralinguistic referential relations.” (Brandom 1994, 306)

In order to better understand this “anti-representationalist” treatment of representational concepts, it may be useful to distinguish three kinds of representationalism: In a *first* sense, a theory can be said to be representationalist if it uses representational concepts such as “reference” at all, whether these figure as basic or as derived concepts and however they may be defined within the theory. This is obviously a very weak condition, and Brandom’s inferentialism does fulfill it. Brandom is a representationalist of the first kind.

This is not true, however, for the second and the third kinds of representationalism. In the *second*, “realist” sense, a representationalist theory also acknowledges the existence of semantic relations between language and extralinguistic reality. The *third* sense concerns the direction of explanation: a representationalist theory of this kind employs representationalist concepts in order to explain the concept of inference. Such a theory may explain “truth” by means of extralinguistic reference, and “inference” as a truth-preserving

transition from premises to conclusions. It is clear that Brandom rejects both realist and explanatory representationalism.

As the reader may have noticed, the title of this paper is reminiscent of the famous remark by Friedrich Engels about the Marxist treatment of Hegel's dialectic – “from its head, on which it was standing, it was put on its feet.” (Engels 1976, 41) This may remind us that Brandom is an admirer of Hegel, but of course we are not concerned with Marxist materialism versus Hegelian idealism. Our theme is representationalism versus anti-representationalism, and here the distinction between realist and explanatory representationalism is important, because I intend to combine Brandom's explanatory anti-representationalism with a realist representationalism.

In other words, I will try to outline how a realist theory of reference can be built upon the inferentialist theory of meaning. In fact, this seems to be a rather straightforward theoretical move that is already prefigured in the structure of *Making It Explicit*, which consists of two parts with four chapters each (not counting chapter 9, “Conclusion”). The second part of the book deals with representation in terms of the inferentialist framework developed in part one. It is possible to adhere to part one and abandon part two by supplying the inferentialist theory of meaning with a realist view of semantic reference.⁴

2. Inferential Articulation

For Brandom, “inference” is a normative notion. Conceptual norms determine whether an inference is correct or not. The latter depends, above all, on whether the participants in the language-game *accept* the inference as correct, since linguistic performances “cannot be understood as correct or incorrect without reference to their assessment or acknowledgment as such by those in whose practice the norms are implicit.” (Brandom 1994, 63)⁵ But Brandom does not endorse a naturalistic reduction of the normative. Neither can normative concepts be reduced to nonnormative ones (to concepts describing the behavior of people, for example), nor do normative facts supervene on nonnormative facts:

Conceptual norms are brought into play by social linguistic practices of giving and asking for reasons, of assessing the propriety of claims and inferences. Products of *social* interactions ... are not studied by the *natural* sciences.... In conferring conceptual content on performances, states, and expressions suitably caught up in them, those practices institute a realm of *culture* that rests on, but goes beyond, the background of reliable differential responsive dispositions and their exercise characteristic of merely natural creatures. (Brandom 2000, 26)

In this account of conceptual norms, many details are involved that cannot be addressed here. For our purposes, it will be enough to get a clear picture of *inferences*. Of particular importance is the fact that Brandom distinguishes three kinds of inferential relations, namely, commitment-preserving (or commissive) inferences, entitlement-preserving (or permissive) inferences, and incompatibilities (Brandom 1994, 168–9; 2000, 43).

Let us look at an example. Suppose it is Tuesday and we are talking about the previous day which you refer to as “Monday.” Since I believe that today is Tuesday, I will not object to your use of the word “Monday,” and perhaps I will even use the word “Monday” myself. By doing so, I would acknowledge your linguistic performance, that is, accept your use of the word “Monday” for the previous day. On the other hand, if you erroneously claimed that yesterday was a Sunday, I would probably tell you that you are wrong, which would be an assessment of your performance as being inappropriate. Even if I refrained from actually assessing your performance I would still have the *right* to do so.

Now to the three types of inferences. First, if you *say* that today is Tuesday, you *commit* yourself to this claim, and hence you are also committed to the claim that yesterday was Monday. Thus, commitment is preserved in the inference from “Today is Tuesday” to “Yesterday was Monday.” Second, the claim that today is Tuesday may *entitle* you to the conclusion that our weekly poker game will take place today in the evening, although this conclusion is not forced by the claim, as sometimes the poker game is cancelled or deferred to another day for various reasons. The premise “Today is Tuesday” entitles the players to draw the conclusion if they have no reason for believing otherwise. And third, “Today is Tuesday” is incompatible with “Yesterday was Sunday,” to mention only one example. If you are committed to the first claim, you will also be committed to the falsity of the second, which is to say that you will be committed to the negative claim “Yesterday was not Sunday.”

Brandom takes inferential roles to consist of inferences of these three types. A person is said to possess or understand the concepts “Tuesday,” “Monday,” “today,” “yesterday,” and so on, if he or she is able to draw the conclusions that connect these concepts to each other and to other concepts. Again, this is meant as a sort of knowing-how:

Grasping the *concept* ... is mastering its *inferential* use: knowing (in the practical sense of being able to distinguish, a kind of knowing *how*) what else one would be committing oneself to by applying the concept, what would entitle one to do so, and what would preclude such entitlement. (Brandom 2000, 11)

To be sure, it is not required that all inferences be actually drawn in all cases. The mastery of inferential roles is a capacity that will or will not be executed in particular situations. And, what is more, the normative dimension of inferential roles does not depend on the inferential capacities of a single individual. Even if

a person is not able to infer “Yesterday was Monday” from “Today is Tuesday,” he or she will nevertheless be committed to the first claim when making the second one. Commitments are ascribed to persons by other persons. You may be committed to drawing an inference even though you do not believe that you are committed to drawing it.

Apart from inferences that connect propositions (and thus concepts) to each other, there are two further moves in language-games that connect propositions (and concepts) to the extralinguistic world. Following Wilfrid Sellars (1954), Brandom denotes these as “language entry transitions” and “language exit transitions” (Brandom 1994, 222), although Sellars actually calls the latter “language departure transitions.” Language entry transitions are (noninferential) perceptual reports, whereas language departure transitions result in (intentional) action. Suppose someone asks me where the cell phone is, and I answer, “It’s on the table,” because I see it lying there. This perceptual report, which is *not* an inference, may also trigger an action. For instance, it may cause the asking person to take the phone from the table.

As we are going to see in the next section, these noninferential discursive moves provide the opportunity to interpret inferentialism in terms of realism. For Brandom, however, they have no bearing at all on the question of extralinguistic reference. He denies that they create *referential* relations between language and the world. But, nonetheless, he acknowledges their contribution to the semantic content of concepts and judgments. Brandom uses the term “inferential articulation” for the structure consisting of inferential as well as noninferential moves, that is, of inferential roles (inferences between propositions) on the one hand, and language entry and departure moves on the other. To put it simply, inferential articulation is inferential role plus noninferential transitions.

Although Brandom prefers to understand inferential articulation in a broad sense, as comprising inferential as well as noninferential relations, he points out that in principle one might also construe it in a narrower sense by restricting it to inferential roles alone. Brandom calls the latter “narrowly inferential articulation” and the former “broadly inferential articulation,” which allows a distinction between two types of inferentialism – strong inferentialism and hyperinferentialism:

The view that inferential articulation *broadly construed* is *sufficient* to account for conceptual content I call ‘*strong inferentialism*’. The view that inferential articulation *narrowly construed* is *sufficient* to account for conceptual content, I call ‘*hyperinferentialism*’. The difference between the broad and the narrow construal of inferential articulation is just whether or not *noninferential* circumstances of application (in the case of concepts such as *red* that have noninferential reporting uses) and consequences of application (in the case of concepts such as *ought* that

have noninferential practical uses) are taken into account. (Brandom 2000, 28)⁶

Strong inferentialism is the position defended by Brandom and it will form the basis of the subsequent discussion, which is to say that we will not so much be concerned with inferential roles as with inferential articulation (broadly construed). Again, inferential articulation also includes noninferential relations of propositions to perceptual circumstances and practical consequences. Most important for us will be those perceptual circumstances that cause perceptual reports.

3. Extralinguistic Reference

Words such as “dog,” “phone” and “red” are often used in the absence of dogs, phones and red things, but typically they are also used for making perceptual reports. Seeing a dog, a phone or the color of the evening sky may cause me to say “This is a dog,” “The phone lies on the table” or “The sky is red.” The causal relations existing in these situations between the world and my words are *prima facie* candidates for referential relations *qua* extralinguistic relations.

But being a mere candidate is not enough. There are many other world-to-language relations and, at the moment, we do not know how to identify those among them which determine semantic reference. For example, the smell of freshly cooked food can trigger statements that contain the word “hungry,” but of course this word does not refer to the smell or to the food. Referential relations must have some characteristic traits that distinguish them from other causal relations. What are these distinguishing features?

First of all, there is a close connection between the reference of words and the meaning, or content, of propositions. Typically, even if not always, a change in propositional content goes along with a change of reference. My claim that the phone is on the table implies, among other things, that a technical device is on the table. This inference is just one element of the complete inferential role and thus of the propositional content of my claim. If this inference did not hold and if my claim instead implied, say, that there is a *toy* on the table, the word “phone” would mean something else, namely, an object for playing (given that “toy” keeps its common meaning). The noninferential language entry transitions would also be different in this counterfactual situation, because some toys (not actual phones) would cause me to use the word “phone.” Or, as semantic realists prefer to say, the word “phone” would *refer* to a kind of toy.

This example illustrates the well-known fact that reference depends on meaning. This distinguishes referential relations from many other relations in which language is involved. However, this does not suffice to define referential relations. Consider again the word “hungry”: I probably would not use this word when smelling the food, if “hungry” had a different meaning not related to eating. So here, the causal relation between the food in front of me and my

usage of “hungry” does depend on the word’s meaning. Hence, this dependence cannot be the only criterion for identifying reference relations.

Another criterion is needed. We find it in Brandom’s pragmatic semantics which describes the use of language not only as embedded in causal relations but also as governed by conceptual norms. As explained above, inferential articulation in the broad sense – that is, inferential role plus noninferential transitions – is a normative matter. We already know that Brandom distinguishes between commitments, entitlements and incompatibilities. Of these three types of normative relations, the first one is the crucial factor for understanding extralinguistic reference.

Let us have another look at the phone on the table. When I see it lying there, I am committed to the claim that it is on the table, a claim I could make, for example, in response to an appropriate question. And when I announce that I will take the phone from the table, I am likewise committed to an action – to do something particular with this object. In order to prevent misunderstanding, it is important not to confuse these conceptual commitments with moral commitments. If I chose to lie, or not to answer the question at all, and even if it were morally correct to act in this way, the *conceptual* commitment would still exist.

The former suggests that noninferential transitions governed by conceptual commitments contribute to the creation of referential relations. What gives additional support to this assumption are those cases which exhibit causality between the world and language but *no* extralinguistic reference. In these situations, there seems to be no conceptual commitment either. Although I may say that I am “hungry” when smelling food, I am not committed (but probably only entitled) to the correctness of using this word.

Furthermore, in numerous perceptual contexts, the non-existence of conceptual commitment indicates the non-existence of reference. It is conceptually inappropriate to claim that there is a phone when you see that there is not one. In such a context, you are not committed to the correctness of using the word “phone” and, in fact, this word has no referential object. Conversely, a commitment to the correctness of a certain perceptual report (“The phone is on the table”) regularly goes along with the presence of the referential object.

In sum, conceptual commitments and referential relations seem to come together in perceptual situations. This gives support to the thesis that referential relations can be introduced into inferentialism when we understand them as extralinguistic relations that are determined by the inferential articulation of discursive practice, in particular, by noninferential transitions governed by conceptual commitments.

Realist inferentialism is a good name for this combination of inferentialist semantics and extralinguistic reference. Of course, the previous discussion is far from being final. I did not present an argument that “proves” that normative commitments create reference. It is mainly a matter of finding a plausible interpretation that reconciles inferentialism about semantic content with realism about reference. This interpretation gets some plausibility from the above

discussion, but it would certainly profit from additional support. One way of testing a philosophical theory is to see whether it helps to solve problems that are not solved, or even raised, by other theories, particularly by those bearing a certain resemblance to the first one. In order to examine the realist version of inferentialism more closely, it is therefore useful to investigate whether it can solve some of the problems raised by causal theories of reference. If so, this would speak in favor of realist inferentialism. The ability to solve problems is a virtue of a theory, after all.

4. Causal Reference

Causal theories of reference are often presented as theories of “representation” or “meaning,” which may be misleading, though, not least because these words do not always have the same meaning. The meaning of “representation,” for example, oscillates between “reference” and “content.” However, the common ground of all causal theories of reference is the assumption that extralinguistic reference, under whatever name, does exist and that it is determined by causal relations similar to Brandom’s “language-entry transitions.”

It is instructive to start the discussion with a theory that is far too simple to be tenable, but will serve to uncover the problems addressed in more sophisticated causal theories of reference. Jerry Fodor has called it the “Crude Causal Theory” (CCT) and described it as follows:

Let’s start with the most rudimentary sort of example: the case where a predicative expression (‘horse,’ as it might be) is said of, or thought of, an object of predication (a horse, as it might be). Let the Crude Causal Theory of Content be the following: In such cases the symbol tokenings denote their causes, and the symbol types express the property whose instantiations reliably cause their tokenings. So, in the paradigm case, my utterance of ‘horse’ says *of* a horse that it *is* one.

‘Reliable causation’ requires that the causal dependence of the tokening of the symbol upon the instancing of the corresponding property be counterfactual supporting: either instances of the property actually do cause tokenings of the symbol, or instances of the property *would* cause tokenings of the symbol *were they to occur*, or both. I suppose that it is necessary and sufficient for such reliable causation that there be a nomological – lawful – relation between certain (higher-order) properties of events; in the present case, between the property of being an instance of the property *horse* and the property of being a tokening of the symbol ‘horse.’ (Fodor 1987, 99)⁷

To see the inadequacy of the CCT we just need to realize that it implies the following: “The Crude Causal Theory says, in effect, that a symbol expresses a

property if it's nomologically necessary that *all* and *only* instances of the property cause tokenings of the symbol." (Fodor 1987, 100) There are at least two reasons why this consequence is unacceptable. We have already discussed above that properties often cause symbol tokenings which do not refer to that property, for example, when the smell of food causes me to say that I am "hungry." Other counterexamples are perceptual errors: seeing a cow from afar, you call it a "horse" because you believe that it is one. Numerous different circumstances which do not include horses or hungry persons may trigger the use of the words "horse" and "hungry." So it is not true that a symbol is *only* caused by the property to which it refers.

The second reason why the CCT must be wrong is that most of the objects and properties that I perceive to exist in a situation do not affect me in such a way that I feel the need to refer to them verbally. After all, I may see a cow without talking about it. Hence it is not true that *all* instances of a property cause the respective symbol tokenings.

These quite obvious objections show the need for a modification of the CCT. Different modifications are possible, leading to as many different causal theories of reference. But since the CCT is here only considered to give an idea of what a causal theory of reference is, and what its problems are, we need not go into the details of possible improvements.⁸ Instead, we shall return to our theme and examine the problem-solving capacities of realist inferentialism. How, then, does this version of inferentialism deal with the problems just raised?

Help comes again from the normative notion of conceptual commitment. When seeing a cow, I am conceptually committed to the claim that there is a cow, whether or not I actually *say* that there is one. This commitment remains implicit until it is made explicit, for example, by answering the question whether the animal I am seeing is a cow. If my answer to this question is "no," I will likely receive some kind of "sanction" – a disapproving assertion or gesture, a headshake, a facial expression, or the like. In turn, I am *not* committed to the claim that this animal is a *horse*, even if I erroneously take it to be one.⁹

To conclude this section, the advantages of a semantic theory that employs normative concepts, such as "commitment," over causal theories of reference should have become clear. Conceptual norms serve to pick out those causal relations between the world and language that determine reference. Perhaps it would not be wrong to say that in normative linguistic practices some causal relations are *turned into* referential relations by *treating* them as referential relations. The norms, and with them the referential relations, become visible, for example, when errors are assessed as errors by community members.

5. Social Triangulation

Here it is neither possible, nor necessary, to discuss in full how realist inferentialism solves or avoids the difficulties faced by the CCT and by more

elaborated causal theories of reference. Two additional examples shall suffice. There is, for one, the notorious “disjunction problem” (Fodor 1987, 102). In language acquisition research this is known as “semantic overgeneralization”: a child could learn the word “horse” and use it for some similar-looking animals, too, perhaps for cows. Thus, when used by the child, the word “horse” would seem to denote the disjunctive property of being a horse *or* a cow. We already know how the inferentialist judges the matter: the child is *committed* to use the word “horse” for horses but not committed to use it for cows, which becomes explicit when adults react by correcting the error. The social character of linguistic practice which puts children in the learning position also ensures the authority of adults in this question.

The other problem requires a slightly longer consideration. It is the well-known issue of the length of the causal chain between the referential object and the word. When the phone on the table causes me to utter the word “phone,” the causal chain consists of many intermediate links including the light waves reflected by the surface of the device into my eyes. Obviously the word does not refer to the light but to the device. Nor does it refer to the picture on my retina or to the person who had put the phone on the table, which are also links in the causal chain that eventually led to my uttering of the word. What makes one particular causal link – the phone on the table – to the referential object of the word “phone”?

The solution lies again in the social character of language. In a series of papers, Donald Davidson has explained that it needs at least two people to determine causal reference. The following quotation mentions a child who learns the usage of the word “table” and some adults (denoted by “us”):

It is a form of triangulation: one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table, and the third line goes between us and the child. Where the lines from child to table and us to table converge, ‘the’ stimulus is located. Given our view of child and world, we can pick out ‘the’ cause of the child’s responses. It is the common cause of our response and the child’s response. (Davidson [1992] 2001, 119)

Davidson proceeds by explaining that this social triangulation, “while not sufficient to establish that a creature has a concept of a particular object or kind of object, is necessary if there is to be any answer at all to the question what its concepts are concepts of.” (Ibid.) It is not sufficient, indeed, and from an inferentialist point of view it is easy to see what is missing – the normative dimension, above all.

It would be misleading to conceive of triangulation as a purely natural process, which is suggested, however, when Davidson mentions the coordinate movement of fish schools as a simple form of triangulation within the biological world (Davidson [1997] 2001, 128). The inferentialist conception of triangula-

tion, in contrast, is that of a normative practice. When the learning child is situated in the triangle consisting of the table, the adults and the child itself, it is committed to use the word “table” when the adults point to the table and ask how this thing is called. Affirmative or corrective reactions on the side of the adults are reactions to obeying or violating the norms that rule the usage of the word. When the learning period is over, the child should have acquired a grasp of these norms. It must be able to draw inferences between propositions of which some contain the word “table.” Only then would we be justified to say that the child *understands* this word. And only if the child showed a mastery of the language-entry transitions, that is, if it reacted to the presence of tables by using the word “table,” would we be justified to assert that the child successfully *refers* to tables.¹⁰

6. Why Combining Inferentialism With Realism?

Realist inferentialism maintains that extralinguistic reference exists because we evaluate causal relations between the world and language according to norms of usage. Referential relations come into being when noninferential reports, that is, causal language entry transitions, are practically treated as appropriate. The word “phone” refers to phones because we think it appropriate to use that word when there *really is* a phone.

However, this does not imply that the role of noninferential reports in fixing reference is the same for all kinds of words. Whereas the presence of some objects can be reported noninferentially, to others we cannot refer without using inferences and descriptions. These include, for example, objects of physics such as quarks and nuclear forces, and past events such as the asteroid impact that might have led to the extinction of the dinosaurs. We cannot refer to these things without using hypothetical descriptions – “protons consist of three quarks,” “the quarks are held together by the strong nuclear force,” “the Chicxulub crater in Mexico was caused by the asteroid that also caused the extinction of the dinosaurs,” and so on.¹¹

Therefore, the realist inferentialist should not insist that reference is determined by noninferential reports *alone*. Realist inferentialism may content itself with the weaker claim that noninferential reports (causal language entry transitions) are *necessary* for the existence of extralinguistic reference. This is quite obvious in the case of simple sensory qualities denoted by words such as “red,” “black,” “sweet” and “sour.” But even the word “quark” can only refer to whatever it refers because it is possible to empirically localize and identify those objects that, according to physical theory, consist of quarks. Here, noninferential reports and theoretical descriptions work together in fixing reference.

One important consequence of the existence of referential relations to the world is that this gives the chance to define “truth” in a realist way. The proposition that cows are not horses, for example, is true because the animals referred to as “cow” do not, in *reality*, belong to the set of animals denoted as

“horse.” Contrary to this, Brandom advocates a version of the “prosentential” theory of truth (Grover, Camp, and Belnap 1975), treating the word “true” as an operator that serves to form sentences that anaphorically refer to other sentences (Brandom 1992, 301–5). Now, the popularity of the prosentential theory of truth seems to be rather low in philosophy. It is safe to say that far more philosophers support realist conceptions of truth, including the view that truth is some sort of “correspondence.” For these realists, at least, the combination of inferentialism and realism should be more attractive than Brandom’s anti-realism.

But even those having little sympathy for realism might acknowledge that the noninferential relations between the world and language postulated by *strong* inferentialism are very similar to old-fashioned reference relations. Remember that inferential articulation, broadly construed, “includes as inferential the relation even between circumstances and consequences of application, even when one or the other is *noninferential*” (Brandom 2000, 220). Does this not open a door for semantic realism that may be opened completely?

At this point another question arises, however. Given that we prefer to add a big dose of realism to inferentialism, why stick to inferentialism at all? As explained at the end of the first paragraph, we can conceive of realist inferentialism as accepting the first, inferentialist part of Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* while rejecting the second, anti-representationalist, part. Why not give up the first part as well?

One reason for staying true to inferentialism concerns ontology, namely, the issue as to what kind of entities linguistic meanings are. Inferentialism is a use theory of meaning, a pragmatic semantics. Some competing theories construe meanings as abstract (“platonic”) entities outside the human mind or, in contrast, as some sort of mental entities. Use theorists tend to regard these as rather dubious non-empirical or subjective objects, whereas language use is a perfectly public matter that can be observed by other people, including linguists and social researchers.

But this is not the place to go into the details of alternative theories of meaning.¹² I just want to indicate that, from an empirical point of view, it speaks in favor of the use theory that it does not place meaning beyond the reach of observation and empirical research. “Language use” is an empirical concept.

On the other hand, theory always goes beyond the realm of pure observation when it systematizes and explains observable facts. A salient theoretical notion in inferentialism is that of conceptual norm. Although we cannot say that conceptual norms are *observable* in a strict sense, the best method of studying them is through empirical investigation of social-linguistic practice. This is where the “social institution of conceptual norms” comes in, that is, Brandom’s assumption that norms are implicit in social-linguistic practice insofar as commitments and entitlements are attributed and acknowledged by the community (Brandom 1994, 46–55).

This empirical orientation of use theories in general, and of inferentialism in particular, seems to be a desirable feature, given that one aim of these theories

is to provide a philosophical background for empirical linguistics and social sciences. Furthermore, according to Brandom, the normative is not to be reduced to the nonnormative. Inferentialism is free from the obsession with naturalistic reductionism that we know from so many philosophical battlegrounds. From an interdisciplinary perspective, this may help to build a bridge to those areas of empirical research on the normative dimensions of language and social behavior where reductionism is not the dominating view.

NOTES

1. One must bear in mind, however, that Brandom analyzes these concepts in unusual ways that contradict common interpretations and are not easily accessible at first sight. A similar caveat applies to his treatment of some philosophical positions, pragmatism being one example.

2. The meanings of other types of speech acts (questions, commands etc.) are derived from the meanings of the respective assertions.

3. To be exact, the basic notion is “material inference.” A formal inference is just a special kind of material inference (Brandom 1994, 97–105). For example, the inference from “It is raining” and “If it is raining, then the streets will be wet” to “The streets will be wet” is a formal inference. The inference from “It is raining” to “The streets will be wet” is a material inference (but not a formal one). Brandom adopts this distinction from Sellars (1953).

4. Brandom’s view of meaning and representation has drawn critical reactions by semantic realists, among others. A valuable source is the anthology *Reading Brandom*, edited by Bernhard Weiss and Jeremy Wanderer (2010). As far as I know, however, no interpretation comparable to mine has been tried, although the contribution of Michael Dummett (2010) to that book seems to hint in the same direction.

5. Compare also the following programmatic passage from the book’s preface: “This is an explication of explicitly normative conceptual contents in terms of implicitly normative practices, rather than a reduction of normative terms to nonnormative ones. It illuminates the normative dimension of discursive practice in line with the methodological principle that implicit structures are often best understood by looking at how they can be made explicit.” (Brandom 1994, xiv)

6. Besides strong inferentialism and hyperinferentialism, Brandom also mentions *weak* inferentialism, which is defined by the general assumption that conceptual content necessarily requires inferential articulation.

7. Fodor adds that “the Crude Causal Theory has a much better chance of working for mental representations than it does for (e.g.) English words.” The reason for this is that “the causal dependence of tokenings of mental representations upon semantically relevant situations in the world is typically more reliable than the causal dependence of tokenings of English expressions upon semantically relevant situations in the world.” (Fodor 1987, 100) In fact, causal theories are typically suggested as theories of *mental* reference (or content). But here I am dealing with the CCT as a theory of *linguistic* reference in order to exhibit the problems faced by theories of this type.

8. Fodor himself introduces the notion of “asymmetric dependence,” which roughly means that a symbol is used in the absence of its referential object only because it is caused by its referential object in other situations. Putting it counterfactually, the

word “horse” would not be used in the absence of horses – for speaking about a cow, for example – if it were not being used in the presence of horses for referring to these. “So, the causal connection between cows and ‘horse’ tokenings is, as I shall say, *asymmetrically dependent* upon the causal connection between horses and ‘horse’ tokenings.” (Fodor 1987, 108)

9. Even if I used the word “horse” *metaphorically* for a non-horse, such as a cow that is used for riding, I would not be committed to do so. Moreover, there is also a sense in which “This is a horse” applies to toy horses and pictures of horses. But in such a case, it would also be correct to say that “this is not really a horse” (but just a toy or a picture), which again signals that I am not committed to call the thing a horse (in contrast to “toy horse” or “horse picture”).

10. It is to be noted that for Brandom social triangulation contributes to the establishment of inferential roles, even if not to the establishment of extralinguistic reference (which does not exist for him). In addition, he uses the term “triangulation” also in another sense. What he calls “inferential triangulation” involves relations between different concepts and need not be discussed here (see Brandom 1994, 430–1).

11. Brandom mentions noninferential reports of the presence of muons, also known as mu-mesons: “Particle physicists are trained reliably to respond noninferentially to the presence of mu-mesons in a bubble chamber by reporting the presence of mu-mesons.” (Brandom 1994, 222–3) We may leave it open whether these reports are really noninferential. Even if this applies to muons, it certainly does not apply to all objects of science.

12. Alternatives that do not fall into the categories of “platonism” or “mentalism” are also beyond the scope of this paper, above all, the view that the meaning of a sentence is identical to its truth conditions. See, for example, the overview and discussion in Lycan (2008). Chapter 10 explains truth conditions in terms of possible worlds which are ontologically dubious again. Truth-conditional semantics is championed in the critical response to Brandom by Fodor and Lepore (2007), who admit, with some regret and slight exaggeration, that “Inferential Role Semantics is the consensus view, not just in philosophy but also in cognitive science.” (691)

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